DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 345 890 RC 018 659

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TITLE Improving Staff Development in Rural Communities.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 18p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College School Cooperation; Computer Assisted Instruction; Cooperative Learning; Disabilities; *Distance Education; Educational Technology; Elementary Secondary Education; High Risk Students; *Inservice Teacher Education; *Program Improvement; Rural Areas; *Rural Schools
IDENTIFIERS Indiana

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a staff development approach that linked university faculty to rural schools in order to provide teachers with ongoing in-service training. The focus of the training was on improving educational and support services to children and youth who are mildly disabled or at risk. The program consisted of six self-contained training modules that incorporated traditional coursework with practicum activities. This program has generated some solutions for improving staff development in rural settings, including: (1) linking rural schools and outside experts through audiographic computer systems that simultaneously transmit voice and graphic images; (2) encouraging staff ownership of training so that the schools and the university share responsibility for planning and delivering training sessions; (3) improving on-the-job performance by training teachers to apply the concepts immediately to real-life classroom situations; and (4) fostering stronger collaboration among rural teachers through cooperative learning projects. Distance education and communication technologies can give teachers in rural communities opportunities to upgrade their skills when more conventional forms of training are not available to them. This approach also allows flexibility in developing training activities that are well-suited to the needs of rural communities. (LP)

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IMPROVING STAFF DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

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IMPROVING STAFF DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Research findings have consistently shown that many special and regular educators in rural schools are not properly prepared for the responsibilities they are given (Helge, 1984; 1983; 1979; O'Connor & Rotatori, 1987). In the past, rural schools were somewhat sheltered from the changing demands placed on public schools, but today this is no longer the case (Treadway, 1984). Students are bringing into the classroom an increasingly complex array of problems that affects their school performance, and local communities are also placing new and greater demands on schools that are transforming the classroom curriculum (Lehr & Harris, 1988). Factors such as these have made it imperative that staff development become central to the public schools' mission of educating children and youth so that school personnel can upgrade their skills to respond to the changing character of education (Knapczyk, In press). Special and regular education personnel in rural communities need ready access to information about new teaching practices and innovations so that they can carry out their jobs effectively. Rural school districts, state departments of education, and universities must see to it that instructional personnel obtain this information.

Staff development for special and regular educators in many rural communities is very limited because the sources of expertise for training are located great distances from the schools in which they teach (Knapczyk 1990). The difficulty of obtaining training has been addressed by the National Rural

Research Project and other studies pertaining to rural education (e.g., Helge, 1984). For example, Keegan, 1990; Marrs, 1984; Stewart, Keegan, and Holmberg, 1988; and others have stated that lack of accessibility to training by teachers often contributes to the need to upgrade skills and to the critical personnel shortages in many rural communities.

Most staff development activities take place in one of two forms. Either a school district invites an expert to the community to deliver a short in-service workshop, or the staff takes courses at colleges or universities that are distant from the community. In both cases, there is usually little opportunity for the staff to receive support from the instructors about how to apply the concepts in their job situations after they have completed the training. For example, college professors and in-service workshop coordinators are not readily available to the staff to help them carryover the training to their work situations and most rural schools do not have peer support structures in place for teachers to collaborate on implementing new ideas and solving problems (Thousand & Villa, 1989). Therefore, ways must be found to develop links between rural schools and outside experts that provide ongoing support to educators and that foster carryover of the training to the teachers' on-the-job situations (Condon, Zimmerman & Beane, 1989). In addition, rural schools must look for and develop expertise from within their staff and capitalize on the wealth of knowledge that already exists in the schools.

BACKGROUND

For the past four years Indiana University has been working with several rural school corporations to provide staff development for special and regular education personnel. These activities are field-based in that the teachers remain at their schools during the training and they address problems and concerns that pertain to their everyday teaching responsibilities. The instructors remain at the university and work with the teachers via distance education technology (Knapczyk, In press; Knapczyk, Brush, Champion, Hubbard, & Rodes, In press).

The focus of the training is on improving educational and support services to children and youth who are mildly disabled or at risk so that these students can successfully take part in school and community settings. The thrust of the program is to re-structure classroom and other instructional environments and to facilitate communication, cooperation, and collaboration among school personnel. Particular attention is given to demonstrating effective teaching practices; promoting application of the practices to the teachers' work environment; and restructuring classroom, school, and community settings to offer children a wider array of educational opportunities.

Teams of personnel from rural schools form cohort groups for the program. The staff from over 20 schools and agencies in 10 different communities in southern Indiana have participated in

the program. They can upgrade their skills by completing one or more of the following modules:

Module 1: Determining the Expectations for Successful Performance in School and Community Settings

Module 2: Assessing Student Performance and Designing Individualized Intervention Plans

Module 3: Improving Participation in Instructional Activities

Module 4: Improving Social Skills

Module 5: Improving Organizational Strategies and Study Habits

Module 6: Improving Self-Management and Motivation

Each module is self-contained and includes objectives, visual aides, readings, case studies, and guidelines for application of the teaching practices to the teachers' current assignment. The modules are designed to integrate traditional coursework presentations and practicum activities into a unified training experience. For example, each module has assigned on-the-job projects that teachers tailor to the characteristics of children and youth in their classrooms and schools. In addition, specific training activities are developed and delivered in partnership with other participating schools. Local personnel help plan and team teach the training sessions, set the focus of field experiences, and take an active part in program evaluation and follow-up. The program also promotes collaboration and collegiality among personnel through school-, and community-based

team planning efforts. In the program we have generated some solutions for improving staff development in rural settings that will be presented under the following headings: linking to outside experts, promoting ownership of training, improving on-the-job performance, and increasing staff collaboration.

LINKING TO OUTSIDE EXPERTS

One major challenge to staff development is to minimize the travel time and costs that are usually associated with having outside experts provide the training. A prime consideration in meeting this challenge is to create a two-way communication network that is diversified and flexible enough to support the demands of the training such as those associated with having structured presentations, overseeing small group discussions, or supervising individual practicum projects.

We found that one of the best solutions for meeting this challenge is to develop a communication network between the university and rural schools that allows them to communicate with one another while remaining in their home communities. In our program, we use the communication network with the training sites to support the varied forms in which instruction takes place such as through verbal presentations, print materials, video images, and graphics. This communication link gives us the ability to provide and oversee ongoing training, such as being able to conduct several hour-long meetings and individual feedback

sessions from our home location, rather than traveling to the schools for a single on-site marathon session.

Some rural schools already have cable or satellite links to universities or state departments of education to support a two-way video network. Audiographics, which is a computer-based technology, is a far less expensive option that is particularly well-suited for staff development in rural settings. This technology, as illustrated in Figure 1, gives instructors and students a way to transmit graphic and text information across local telephone lines. Audiographics is interactive because users can send images to different sites that are displayed on the monitors. Users can annotate the images with either text or graphics, such as by writing short comments, underlining statements, or making checks to emphasize important points. The annotations appear simultaneously on the screens at both the origination and receiving sites. The graphic images can be stored on the personal computers and used as part of large group presentations, small group conferences, and individual reporting and feedback sessions. Several schools can network with one another in a conference call format through audiographics and all of the sites have full interactive capabilities.

Insert Figure 1 About Here

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OTING OWNERSHIP OF TRAINING

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the activities as a useful part of their professional development. Research suggests that teachers will assume ownership of the training when the topics and activities closely match the needs and interests of the staff (Treadway, 1984). However, coming up with ways to promote ownership is particularly challenging in distance education programs because the instructors and the students are separated (Keegan, 1990). For example, it is very difficult for us to design realistic and practical training experiences on our own because of the few opportunities we have to become familiar with the situations in which the teachers are working.

In our program we encourage ownership by structuring the training as a cooperative arrangement between the university and the local schools in that we both share the responsibilities for planning and delivering the training sessions. We provide the technical expertise about the topics of the sessions, plan and oversee the training activities, prepare the instructional materials, and participate in the sessions by means of the communication network. By comparison, the school personnel assist in laying out the training sessions and in showing how to use the information in their classrooms and schools. We accomplish this aim by having one of the teachers serve as an on-site coordinator for the sessions who helps to plan the training sessions, coordinate the on-site practice exercises, and monitor the small group projects.

There are several ways in which we and the schools' staff have benefitted from sharing the responsibilities for the training. First, the on-site coordinators give us input into the planning of the program because they can assess the specific needs of the personnel. They are able to identify the topics that need particular emphasis and explain how the topics can be tied to the policies and procedures of the schools. Second, the coordinators make the instruction more personalized because they can give examples of school situations that pertain to the topics and can show how a procedure is used with particular students or in circumstances that all the teachers are familiar with. The coordinators lead in-class discussions and small group activities and elaborate on the topics that are covered in the training sessions. Third, the coordinators give us detailed feedback about the training sessions so that we can modify the sessions and plan follow-up activities. Finally, the coordinators provide on-site resources to the teachers in applying the concepts to their classroom situations. For example, the coordinators consult with the teachers about how to use procedures or methods in their classrooms after the training sessions are completed and they tell us if the staff has further questions about the concepts. We have found that by sharing the responsibilities for the training in these ways, the teachers recognize that they are an integral part of the training experiences.

IMPROVING ON-THE-JOB PERFORMANCE

The primary goal of staff development is to improve the teachers' on-the-job performance. However, all too often in-service training in rural schools comprise "one shot" experiences that do little to actually upgrade the skills of teachers. For example, many of us have participated in Friday afternoon workshops only to discover that by Monday we either forgot what was said in the workshop or were unsure how to apply the ideas to the circumstances of our classrooms.

One of the best solutions for improving on-the-job performance is to include training activities in which the teachers apply the concepts immediately to real life situations. This "reality check" shows teachers that the training is both practical and useful for them. For example, in our module that covers classroom management strategies, we have the teachers complete case study projects in which they come up with actual strategies for modifying the their students' behavior. In this way the training has an immediate impact on improving on-the-job performance because the teachers leave the sessions with definite plans for applying the concepts.

We also encourage carryover of the training by having follow-up sessions after the teachers have tried out the ideas or techniques in their classrooms. The distance education network gives us the ability to offer the training over an extended time period and we can oversee both the planning and the actual implementation of the practicum projects. For example, the

follow-up sessions that we have with the teachers gives them important feedback about their projects and clarifies the procedures they are trying to use. The teachers have stated that these sessions provide valuable input about applying key concepts to their job situations.

INCREASING COLLABORATION AMONG THE STAFF

The fourth consideration in improving staff development is to use the training to foster stronger collaboration among teachers in rural settings. Stronger collaboration can take place because the in-service activities give teachers a common set of experiences that they can use for classroom-, school-, or district-wide planning efforts. They provide opportunities for teachers to share their expertise with one another and to form task-oriented work groups that address issues pertaining to improving educational services (Slavin, Karweit, & Madden, 1989).

In our program, we encourage collaboration among the teachers in several ways. First, we have them complete case studies and projects as school-based teams or grade level units. These projects give teachers with similar backgrounds or common concerns opportunities to plan solutions for instructional problems that are especially useful and functional for them. For example, a training session on improving school-family relationships or on social skills training gives teachers shared knowledge about the topics, and following the session they work together on projects to upgrade these particular aspects of their school's program. We have found that such activities increase

communication and cooperation among the teachers and help them to realize that providing special education services in rural settings requires a team effort based on mutual professional support.

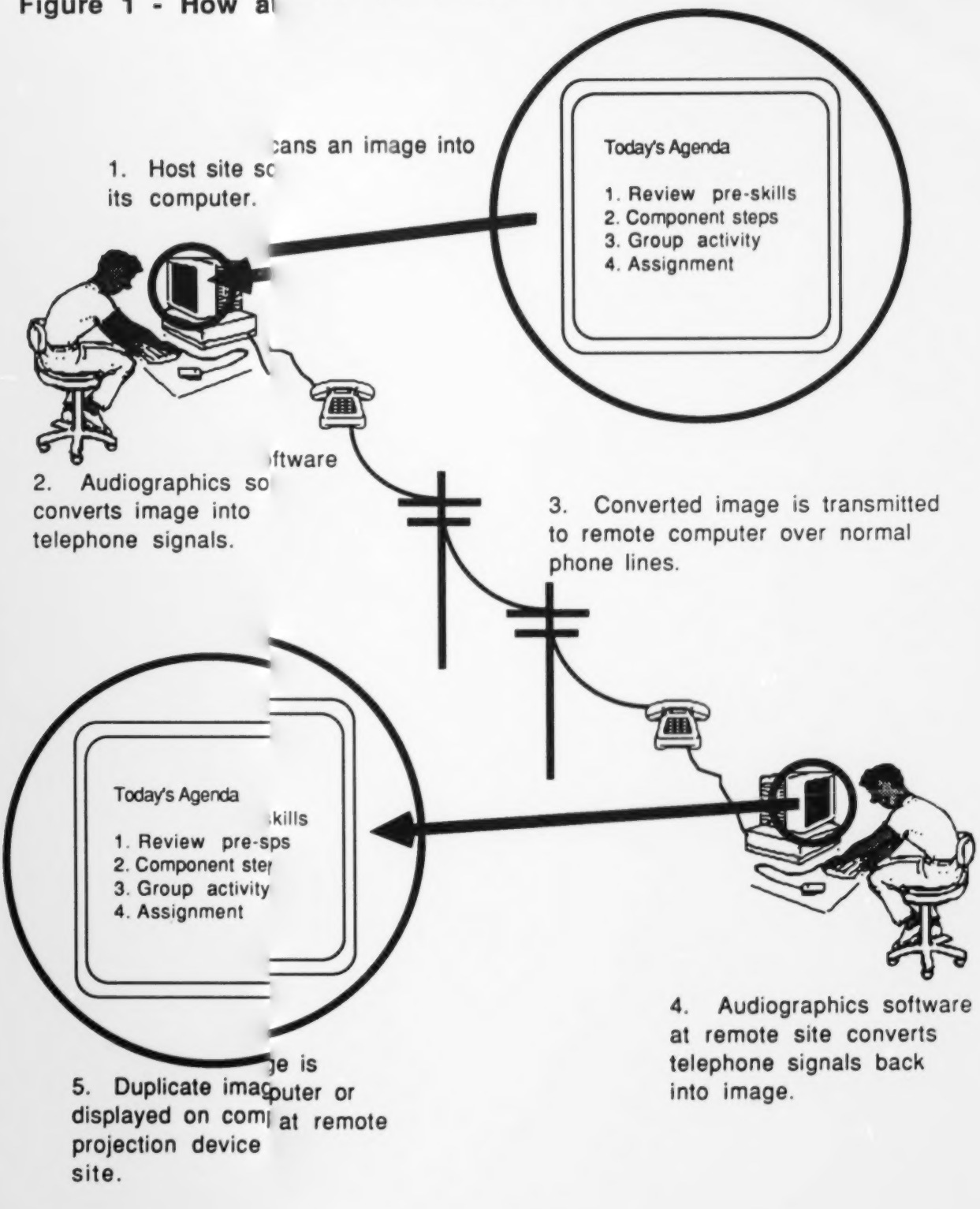
We also have the teachers work as team support groups to refine and further develop the concepts covered in the training. For example, as part of a project on mainstreaming special education students, the teams consider the impact of mainstreaming at their particular grade levels and plan strategies for handling anticipated problems. Furthermore, the team members serve as a resource to one another in carrying out their projects. We are finding that throughout these activities our efforts in staff development act as a catalyst for the ongoing process of upgrading teaching skills and systems change. An important factor in this process is the collaboration among the teachers because their teamwork ensures that the training has a long lasting affect on improving educational programs.

CONCLUSION

Distance education can give special and regular education teachers in rural communities opportunities to upgrade their skills when more conventional forms of training are not available to them. However, the staff members in rural schools must take an active role in planning and delivering this training so that it is practical and useful to them. Distance education and communication technology can give universities, state departments of education, and participating schools tremendous flexibility in

developing training activities that are well-suited to the needs of rural communities. But these efforts will be most successful when training institutions and the school corporations share the responsibilities for the training.

Figure 1 - How a udiographics works



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